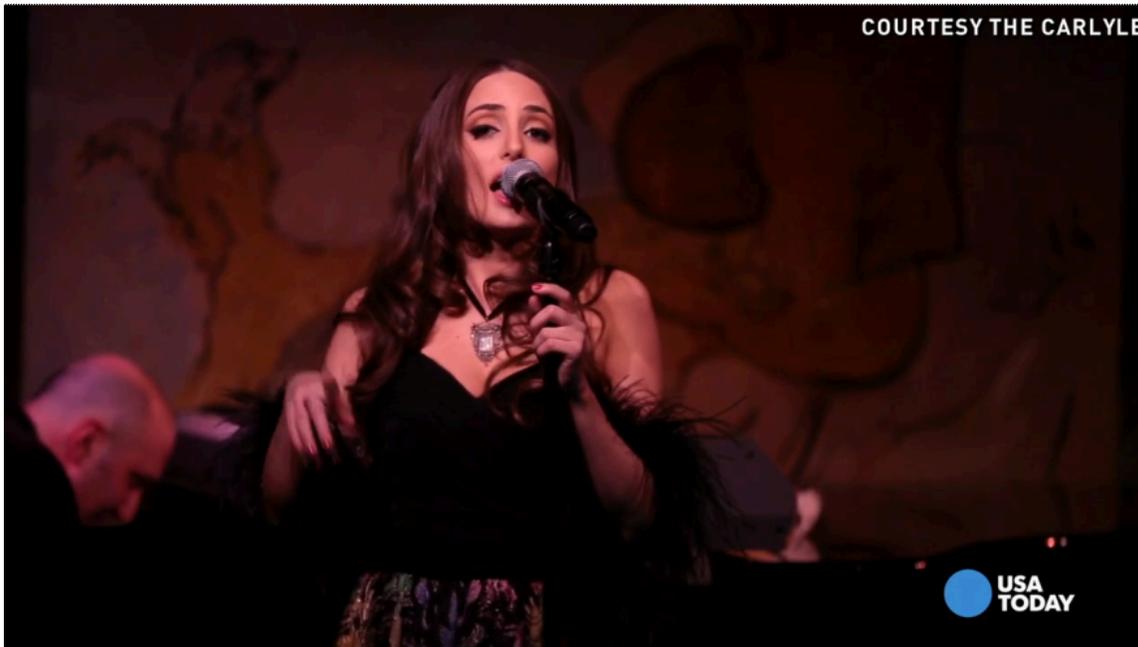




February 23, 2015

Alexa Ray Joel finds her own comfort zone



Like her dad, Billy Joel, singer/songwriter Alexa Ray Joel feels at home singing and performing on the piano. She begins a return engagement singing cabaret at Manhattan's landmark Cafe Carlyle. Video shot by Robert Deutsch for USA TODAY.



(Photo: Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY)

NEW YORK — When Alexa Ray Joel was a little girl, her mother, the supermodel Christie Brinkley, would videotape her singing show tunes from *Les Miserables* and pop ballads made famous by Bette Midler and Whitney Houston. Joel's father, meanwhile — a piano man named Billy — would play songs by Ray Charles, after whom Alexa Ray is named, and the Beatles.

"He's almost like a Zelig as a musician," the younger Joel, also a singer/songwriter/pianist, says admiringly of her dad. "He can do all these voices." That versatility is a quality she shoots for

as well, and one that will be on display at the Cafe Carlyle, Manhattan's storied cabaret venue, when Joel launches an engagement there Tuesday night.

At 29, Joel looks and sounds like one of the Disney heroines who also informed her musical education. She has huge eyes, flowing tresses and a lilting soprano voice that sounds sultrier when she sings. "I can do Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*," she says,



February 23, 2015

perched on a chair in her cozy downtown apartment — styled in "eclectic/rustic/French Bohemian/artsy/gypsy" fashion, with pillows "from my mom's house" strewn on the sofa.

But Joel also draws inspiration from the old-school jazz and blues of Sarah Vaughan and Etta James, and from Tori Amos, Fiona Apple and Kate Bush. Her Carlyle set will emphasize her own latest original song, but also include other tunes by the likes of Charles, Stevie Wonder and Randy Newman. "I don't like to think of them as covers, because I completely reproduce and rearrange everything" down to crafting all the cello parts, she says. (Joel will alternately play keyboards and sing accompanied by another pianist.)

During Joel's first stint at the Carlyle last April, she fainted onstage one night. The cause wasn't nerves, but rather a medical condition that blocks blood from flowing to the brain. She made a return engagement in June, which went off without a hitch.

Joel admits that she struggled for a long time with "social anxiety in group situations." Though music was always in her blood — her paternal grandparents met while performing in a Gilbert and Sullivan show, she points out — and she studied musical theater at New York University for a year, she considered a career as a songwriter for other artists "because I didn't want to go onstage and expose myself."

"I was a late bloomer," Joel says. "I was not comfortable enough to put myself out there until I reached my mid-20s." Again, she brings up her father: "We have very different comfort zones, performance-wise. He's comfortable in a stadium — and obviously, he can play at that level; he's a legend. But even as I progress, I think I'd like to stick to intimate venues."

Offstage, Joel notes, her dad is a more private person. "He'll say to me, 'I don't know what to make of all this social media.' He doesn't understand any of it; Facebook, Instagram — he thinks it's all one page. He doesn't even text." Brinkley, by contrast, is "more out there"; Joel points out how "supportive and encouraging" her mom was when Joel walked her first runway recently, during New York Fashion Week, at the American Heart Association's Red Dress event.

Joel defines her own approach to facing the public as "a mix" of her parents'. She stays connected with fans through Instagram, and posts poetry, but believes in "making sure you keep a semblance of yourself just for yourself."

She plans to share her music more widely with a new album, noting, "I would love to go into the studio as soon as this year." Having recorded independently in the past, Joel says, "I don't ever want to be in a position where I have a label telling me how I should sound. Then again, I don't want to shut any doors as an artist. Never say never."